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Making Scholarly Editions in the Classroom

Jon Miller

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Jon Miller, English, University of Akron

Overview
An alternative to the traditional research paper, the scholarly edition has much to offer students and professors of American literature. By "scholarly edition" I mean a single document that includes a primary text, a note on the text, a paper that summarizes and interprets the text, short endnotes glossing the text, and a bibliography. All of us are familiar with the popular scholarly editions of literary works published for the college classroom by Norton, Broadview, Bedford, and many other scholarly presses. But not all have considered the creation of shorter yet comparable works as an assignment for the undergraduate and graduate classroom or for the undergraduate honors thesis. The following paper describes versions of the assignment developed through many years of experimentation at different levels of instruction, with an emphasis on practical advice for implementing the assignment successfully. It also notes how these projects might be especially useful today for the advancement of American literature scholarship. And the paper concludes by noting how these projects look in the light of recent scholarship on improving undergraduate education through inquiry-based learning and collaboration with faculty in research.

The Scholarly Edition in the American Literature Classroom
Scholarly edition projects can be adapted to suit the literature classroom at any level; I have implemented the assignment at each level from the undergraduate survey to the graduate seminar. As I adapt the assignment for different courses, the parts of this assignment remain the same while the expectations for these parts changes. In a survey, short versions of the assignment work well as an opportunity for the student to
analyze a new work in the context of the other works as well as the literary
trends that are the focus of the survey. In a seminar, the scholarly edition
can help to organize all of the skills and materials taught in the course.
Scholarly editions can work as individual assignments, and they can also
work as projects that students complete by collaboration with one another.

In an upper-level undergraduate or graduate course that has a
scholarly edition as the end goal of the various research and writing
assignments, I introduce an overview of the project early in the
semester—usually in the first week. I then break the assignment into
stages, and I distribute the first assignment in the next class period.

Regardless of the precise timing of the parts of the edition
assignment, students are asked to complete a set of tasks, in a certain
order, before collating all of this work into a first draft of the complete
edition. For the sake of coherence, I will describe each of these parts in
the order that students are asked to complete them.

The Text

The edition begins with a text. As a professor who mainly teaches
American literature before the Civil War, I draw obscure primary materials
from the public domain that compliment the better-known materials that
are often the bulk and focus of the semester’s reading list. To find these
materials, I have relied on my personal collection of antiquarian books and
bound periodicals. But primary texts for edition projects could also be
sourced from libraries, microforms, and online digital archives.

Experience has taught me that it is best to introduce the texts to the
students as early in the semester as possible. It is also best to offer
choices. In a section of the undergraduate survey of American literature to
the Civil War, for example, I distributed copies of The New-York Mirror, the
important antebellum literary magazine. These were not photocopies but
original copies of the complete eight-page numbers, sprung from a broken
and somewhat dirty bound volume that I had purchased, for this purpose, in a flea market for less than twenty dollars. Students were asked to read the entire number and choose an article as the subject of their edition. I advised students that the selection of the very shortest anecdote might leave them with no material for the paper they would eventually write on their selection, and I found that students most often chose the main selection of the number or a full-column work in the interior. In a survey of American women poets before 1900, I came to class with photocopied selections from an antebellum anthology. I prepared about 30 choices for the 20 students in the class; while many students will make a choice quickly and embrace it, a few want to shop around, and I will give the indecisive a stack of choices and a few days to make up their mind. For an upper-level American literature seminar on American Romantic Fiction, I brought photocopies of romantic short fiction from *Graham's Magazine*. In a graduate-level course in American literature before 1800, I brought photocopies of obscure early American works from a late-nineteenth-century literary anthology; in a graduate seminar on Poe and Hawthorne, I selected comparable short fictions by N.P. Willis. For each of these cases more choices were available than students, and I offered each choice, in turn, with pithy and provocative descriptions. "In this work, a woman goes to a ball in a snow-storm. Young men carry her through five feet of snow. Who wants it?" "Here is a short pirate story based on an old Irish legend. Any takers?" "Here is an essay on fishing, with spiritual conclusions." And so forth. I value this part of the assignment because I learn a great deal about the students by watching them light up and volunteer for particular subjects.

Once students have selected a text, the first assignment is simple: copy it. Into the computer. At this point, the students have many questions; here I begin to practice the cheerful repetition of instructions that comes with offering a new assignment. Experience has shown that
the fewer words that I use in the written assignment description, the better. Students, especially undergraduates, can be quite perplexed by a new writing assignment, and I find that fewer words are much easier to repeat and explain than many words. I generally ask for a complete electronic text in either Word or PDF format, submitted by email by a certain time. Students are also instructed to re-submit their work if they do not receive an email confirmation from me within 24 hours. The addition of further and more complicated instructions (e.g., "when you copy what looks to you like a typographical error, add, in brackets, the Latin word "sic") yield diminishing returns. Students can be coached to better mark up their edited text later, as they double-check and correct them. Because there are so many steps in this assignment, the students can only have about one week to create their electronic text.

Double-check the Text

Once I collect an electronic text file from each student, the project moves into the next stage, which is double-checking the text. Undergraduate and graduate students who regard the English major as vocationally wise might enjoy this stage of the assignment.

In the undergraduate survey, the edition assignment is not a semester-long thing, and the expectations for research and writing are not as great as in the seminars. In these sections, I lightly edit each of the student's text files. I create uniform margins, and I change the text to double-spaced 12-point Courier. I then print a hard copy of each edition and, comparing the student's copy against the original, I mark up their hard copy with red pen. I do not find it necessary to grade this part of the assignment because some texts are harder to copy than others, but all students are expected to repair their file into a flawless state eventually. I do make notes in my gradebook about the general quality of the first copy,
and I share these notes as written feedback at the end of the student’s copy. Late work is also noted and will hurt the final grade.

In upper-level undergraduate seminars and graduate seminars, I perform the same edits on each file (certain margins, 12-point double-spaced courier) and print two hard copies of each assignment. Or, alternately, I have required students to bring two hard copies, with these formatting requirements, to the class following the deadline for their electronic submission.

I bring additional photocopies of the primary texts, and each student leaves class with a hard copy of another student’s copy plus a photocopy of that student’s subject. We have a short class session on basic proofreading marks, and the students are given a week to double-check and copy-edit the hard copy of their peer’s electronic text. The goal is faithful accuracy to the original. Students are also asked to write readerly feedback on the original to help identify the words, phrases, and cultural references in the primary text that might be worth glossing in a note. Meanwhile, I do the same.

Each student then receives, perhaps a week later, two corrected hard copies of their electronic text. The student then has one week to correct his or her electronic text and re-submit it.

Through the creation of their electronic text file, students gain an appreciation for the difficulties that scholars and editors face when they create the scholarly editions that students purchase for the course. They realize, first-hand, how difficult it can be to accurately reproduce a text. In class we talk about optical character recognition software and the fact that it is easier, and more pleasant, to achieve an accurate text if you retype it from scratch. (Today the best OCR software still produces ”dirty ASCII”—even at 99% accuracy, the scanned text requires extensive and painstaking manual editing.)
Creating an accurate electronic copy of a primary work also immerses the student in the work to an uncommon degree. Twenty years ago, Masterplots were available—in the library. Today the Wikipedia and fan websites provide summaries of major and minor works by the once-"canonical" authors, so many students are in the habit of preparing for literature class by a combination of careful reading, skimming, and a review of readily-available plot summaries. Most students can type extremely well and fast, by historical standards, so the challenge of copying the text lies mainly in the sustained and careful attention to the original.

This inevitably entails a scrutiny of the work's language and idiom, which in turn provokes much genuine inquiry into the work's basic meaning. Early American literature is full of idiom that the scholar and professor readily understands; for undergraduates, however, phrases such as "I was suffered to educate myself wrong" now demand immediate explanation as the student wonders if it contains a typographical error. So the primary literature is not only new to the student because it is obscure, and hardly ever studied in a literature classroom, if ever. It is new to the student because the student takes care to reproduce the primary text, in all of its undulating strangeness of that period's idiom, character by character.

In the process of double-checking their work and having their work double-checked by another, the students also learn something about their ability to perform such a task successfully. The student who does not do careful work at the beginning will have extra work at this point.

**The Notes**

After copying, double-checking, and attempting to perfect their electronic text, students are asked to write a collection of notes for their selection. The subject of these notes come from two or three sources.
Areas in the text that could use a note are identified by the curiosity of the student, the student’s peer editor (if he or she had one), and the professor. I might also hand out a collection of generic paper topics for these readings to suggest areas of historical and literary scholarship that might yield information that glosses the story in a satisfying way. When working with short stories by N.P. Willis, for example, I noted how there is scholarship on the history of transportation (perhaps relevant to the sailing and stagecoaching stories) as well as an extensive range of books and articles on the history of medicine (perhaps relevant to the tales of asylums and the narrations of supernatural events). As all scholars understand, inquiry into the basic meaning of innocuous-looking passages and allusions can lead to research that produces insights of an unexpectedly full degree. What looks like a casual allusion to a recent shipwreck disaster might come, for the student, to be a central and organizing element of the creative work.

I generally defer to the curiosity of the student when explaining the requirements of this stage of the assignment. Some students will ask, "How many notes should I write?" "Is five enough? How about six?" To such questions I reply, "You should write as many notes as the story needs." Questions about the length of the notes are met with a similar reply. I try not to evade; when students ask about length and number, I explain how some stories need more notes than others. I also explain that some audiences will require more explanation than others. A few students will catch fire in research and write far more annotations than I imagined possible, and the inquiry of a few others will need further encouragement. But most students will create a reasonably conscientious list of notes.

The students are required to provide full bibliographic citations for all sources of information that they consult to write their notes. This can lead to the usual and important conversations about how to assess the
scholarly integrity of reference sources ranging from Wikipedia to the *Oxford Companion to American Literature*.

Students are asked to insert their notes into their electronic text and re-submit this to complete this stage of the assignment. I then review the notes and continue conversation with each student, through written feedback, informal after-class comments, and planned conferences, concerning how best to approach the work for a longer paper that could serve as an introduction that performs some close reading of the work.

**The Note on the Text and the Bibliography**

At some point in the weeks that the students have to work on the longer paper about the primary text, they are asked to re-submit the electronic text with both a Note on the Text and some form of a Bibliography.

For the Note on the Text assignment, we examine this feature as it appears in every one of our scholarly editions from the well-known scholarly presses. We go over all the cryptic notes and dates at the bottom of entries in the Norton Critical editions. Students are asked to make some basic decisions about their text. Should they correct the typographical errors, for example, or leave them in? We discuss the various particular questions that students are facing, as well as the options they might have. The students then make those decisions and write a sentence or two explaining them. We can also discuss the extent to which some of the best-known works exist in multiple forms. Which *Leaves of Grass*, which "Raven," which "Thanatopsis" do we study? The student's Note on the Text must also include a full bibliographic description of the source of their text with some comment, if appropriate, on the existence of other versions. (I might not expect an undergraduate to review all easily-accessible republications of John Neal's popular essay on children, for example, but I would expect this from a graduate student.) In a few cases,
students will go on to make the published variants on the works in their edition the subject of their critical paper. One student, for example, discovered that her subject, an Ohio woman poet, re-wrote the same poem, at different times and for different periodicals, in wildly contrasting ways. The student reviewed these variants for her critical edition of the work.

Students are also instructed to build a terminal bibliography at the end of their file. Here we can begin to see how their research is collecting materials around their primary text, and the patterns or holes in this collection can be useful guideposts as the students develop their inquiry into a question that yields the close reading required for the paper and the final version of the edition.

**The Paper**

The expectations for the paper associated with the scholarly edition vary greatly from the undergraduate survey to the graduate seminar. It has been my experience that the best results come from framing the paper as an introduction with a close reading of the text. Students can be asked to summarize the biographical and historical contexts of the primary text as well as the relevant scholarship. Since the students are often working with truly obscure authors who rarely if ever appear in the American literary scholarship, they are often coached to frame their approach to this author with reference to the scholarship on another, better-known figure. An Ohio transcendentalist, for example, might be of interest to Emerson scholars, and so forth.

Often I ask for a first draft of the paper that is much longer than I will require for the final, completed edition. With graduate students, for example, I might require three to five thousand words; with undergraduates, I might ask for two thousand words. From this paper we
will cull the best and condense or omit the rest. Significant digressions, too good to discard, might become notes keyed to relevant passages.

The Final Project

Once a paper has been written and evaluated with an eye for abridgment, students are asked to collate all parts of their work into one document. This stage requires more explanation and repetition of directions than I expected at first. Students cut and paste their work into one document in this order: introductory paper, note on the text, text, notes, bibliography. Some papers will be more introductory than others, but all should perform some close reading of the text. Some texts will have more and fuller notes than others. Bibliographies might be "Works Cited," if the student consulted much, "Works Consulted," if the student consulted little, or "Further Reading," if the student was abounded in curiosity and discovered a wealth of contexts and approaches worth sharing.

Publication of Scholarly Editions

These editions need not end at this point. Drawing on my experience editing journals and reading typographic style manuals, in some courses I have pushed the work on these editions into print. These projects have great potential to provide further vocational experience in scholarly editing and publishing.

The earlier I begin the series of assignments that culminate in a complete edition, the more opportunity I have to show students how the preparation of their work for publication might necessitate further revision.

Today the choices for print are three-fold. First, editions can be put on the web. Rather than publish mere etexts, I created PDF versions of the student work in a form (three columns of 9-point Minion) that not only looks like an antebellum literary magazine, but also fits into the photocopier to reproduce the work, legibly, in as few pages as possible.
At first my edition assignments were ending with the submission of the final projects. And after a few weeks to clear my head, I would review them and select the best. These editions I then offered to prepare for web publication in the form just described. That said, it would take me about three to four hours to lay out each edition. And I would publish nothing without the student's final approval. Often, when laying out the edition, I would discover loose ends that I thought the student must repair before the work could be published on the web.

Many students expressed pleasure and enthusiasm for continuing work on their project in the weeks after the end of the semester, but few students had the time. The way a program of study is constructed today, there is little incentive for students to do further work on a project that they submitted for a course the previous semester. In some cases, students were motivated by the desire to have a nice-looking edition of their work on the web for their church community or for admissions committees at graduate schools. Other students were interested not so much in further completing the project, but in starting a new, larger one as an honors project.

I also learned that, while it was plausible for me to work so much on student projects during the semester I was teaching them, I also had trouble finding time to finish the best projects for web publication. To make the project viable in a long-term way, I decided that I would attempt to see the editions into a print-worthy form during the semester.

This requires moving up the due dates for the assignment as close as possible to the beginning of the semester in order to give students four weeks to revise their final project through proofs.

The second form of publication now available for student work is the print-on-demand book. In my time as a journal editor, I became painfully aware of the conditions required for successfully publishing a small run of a trade paperback. So I understood the potential of the new
print-on-demand services offered by companies such as Lulu.com when they first began to offer the printing of trade paperbacks on demand at a low cost.

Going into the summer semester of 2008, I decided to advance the project into trade paperback form. The students worked together on short stories by N.P. Willis. This collaboration extended beyond double-checking and commenting on one another's projects; we worked together to complete an edition of Willis's short stories with short essays that complimented one another. It took about twenty hours over a weekend for me to produce the camera-ready PDF files with all of their completed projects, but it was worth the effort as the students were able to see their work in proof. I expected that students would be excited, but still I was surprised at how pleasing they found the experience. They were especially happy to see their names on the cover (which we designed together in a class session).

This brings me to the third avenue for the publication of student editions. I had a difficult time explaining to these graduate students that, just because we could make a handsome PDF file and print it ourselves, that does not mean that the students were getting something that would necessarily be worth listing on an academic CV. Here they resisted the most patient explanations of the value and significance of peer review. Finally I relented and offered to submit the work to a scholarly press, if they did their best work.

At the end of the semester, twenty copies of our work came in the mail just before the penultimate class meeting. I wrote a cover letter and submitted the project to the University of Akron Press. After several meetings with the Director of the Press and the Editorial Board, the project was accepted, pending peer review. The findings of peer review were positive, but recommended revisions to the structure of the book. The
book is now scheduled for 2010 publication, and I remain in regular contact with the students from this course as we make the final revisions.

Whether student editions are published on the web, in a print-on-demand book, or through a scholarly press, there are avenues for publication today that justify extending the work on a student project beyond the submission of their final complete manuscript.

The Need for Editions in American Literary Studies

The scholarly editions produced through this assignment address not only a pedagogical goal but also a genuine scholarly need. As the MLA Ad Hoc Committee on the Future of Scholarly Publishing recently found, the future of scholarly editions, particularly in nineteenth-century American literature, is in jeopardy. The decline in financial support for scholarly editions; the fact that, historically, editions of literary works have been "expensive and time-consuming to produce"; and the professional fact that editions "tend not to be seen as significant scholarly achievements" all deter scholars and presses from creating needed modern editions (175-76). At the same time, however, recently created digital collections of nineteenth-century books and periodicals are rendering rare primary materials easily accessible to groups prepared to collaborate in the preparation of scholarly editions. Thus, the time is right to develop pedagogies that will engage interested student collaborators in the massive editorial project American literature scholars must complete to more fully realize the cultural value of all this recently-uncovered and now readily-available intellectual and artistic achievement. Now that we have searchable digital archives, we must read them and work our understanding of them into the broader literary history that was created, in large part, by the studies of a relatively few authors and major works.
Scholarly Editions and the Reinvention of Undergraduate Education

In the mid-1990s the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, with the leadership of Ernest Boyer and Shirley Strum Kenny, created a commission to study the state of undergraduate education and issue recommendations for improving it in the twenty-first century. As "The Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University," in 1998 this commission published Reinventing Undergraduate Education: A Blueprint for America's Research Universities. The Boyer Commission report made an immediate impact on the direction of higher education scholarship. Though widely admired, it was not without critics as various individuals and institutions objected to various recommendations for a wide variety of reasons.

In an essay recalling the early history of the Boyer report, Kenny summarized its findings this way:

Most of the recommendations were research-related: A research university ought to provide research experience for every student, beginning with an inquiry-based freshman year and culminating in a capstone experience. Students should become experienced with interdisciplinary approaches, collaboration, creative uses of information technology, and writing and speaking skills, all necessary components of professional research. (104)

"Research-based learning" and "undergraduate research" became a catch phrase in the years following the publication of the Boyer report, with a wide range of schools instituting (or simply encouraging) changes to the undergraduate experience that answer the call of these findings. The Boyer report inaugurated a fast-growing body of higher-education scholarship devoted to its themes and findings. In a 2003 article Wendy Katkin, for example, documented the great and incomplete extent to which institutions of higher education have acted on the recommendations of the
Boyer Commission. More recently, the ASHE Higher Education report published a monograph by Shouping Hu and others that summarizes the state of undergraduate education with even more care and nuance. Angela Brew, Terry O'Regan, and John Willison, among others, have offered more complete and comprehensive theories of learning in the higher education environment to refine, replace, and advance the Boyer arguments. Mick Healey and Alan Jenkins have helped clarify the extent to which desired large-scale changes to higher education must begin at the curricular level. And Karen Bauer and Joan Bennett have presented empirical evidence from alumni interviews that describes the substantial benefits of their undergraduate research experience.

It is clear that undergraduate research and "research-based" or "inquiry-based" learning is here to stay. In the sciences, the need for change is more clear: students should no longer be merely an audience that receives the transmission of scholarly knowledge. More and more they will be brought into the laboratory to work as collaborators in research experiments. Less clear is what exactly this means for the humanities.

One theme in this Boyer-related higher education scholarship is the meaning of "research." In the sciences, there is a clear divide between performing the literature review and doing things in the laboratory. Most humanities professors believe they are directing "undergraduate research" when they assign "research papers." Jane Robertson and Gillian Blackler have recently published a paper contrasting the students' perception of their relationship with "research" in a variety of disciplines. They found that students in physics, for example, regard "research" as something beyond their undergraduate classrooms while students in English regard "research" as something they do from the start of their program of study.

The simple but not always obvious solution to this confusion of terms lies in comparing the undergraduate research experience to that of their professors. All compelling arguments for "research-based learning"
presume that the student will experience and perform research much as the professor does. There is the greater appeal and engagement of inquiry-driven, hands-on research.

The scholarly editions described at length above offer a model of inquiry-driven, research-based learning endorsed by this recent scholarship if it fits with the professor’s own scholarly work. Since I began my dissertation in antebellum American temperance literature, my research has concerned the “rediscovery” of lost, forgotten, neglected, or obscure literary works. In the 1990s I spent days in the reading room of research libraries and microfilm rooms copying texts. I spent vacations in used-book stores looking for known and unknown materials that could be of use in my dissertation. Diane VanderPol, Jeanne M. Brown, and Patricia Ianuzzi have recently proposed that humanities courses could do more to intentionally link library experiences to courses in a way that mirrors the relationship between the science classroom and laboratory; I have long regarded heaps of neglected literature as a laboratory for my own research. At the turn of the century, I devoted much time to learning how to edit journals and prepare them for publication as I worked for the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* and *The Social History of Alcohol and Drugs*. I prepared an edition of T.S. Arthur’s *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* for a scholarly press, and I prepared mini-editions of out-of-print works that I wanted to add to my syllabi. My interest in typography and book design naturally supports an assignment in which students prepare research for publication.

Not all professors of American literature share this approach to their research and the scholarship. For those who do, however, I offer this assignment as a model that might help them to better align their students’ experience of research with their own.
Works Cited


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